



Southeast Fishery Bulletin

National Marine Fisheries Service, Southeast Regional Office, 263 13th Avenue South, St. Petersburg, FL 33701

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October 13, 2006

FB06-048

NOAA Fisheries Service Seeking Public Comment on a Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS) for the Gulf of Mexico Red Snapper and Shrimp Fisheries

NOAA Fisheries Service is requesting comments from the public on the DEIS developed to address overfishing of red snapper. These comments will be used in finalizing an interim rule for the 2007 fishing year. Comments will also be provided to the Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council (Council) for consideration in developing long-term measures to address overfishing and bycatch in the directed red snapper and shrimp fisheries. The Environmental Protection Agency announced the availability of the DEIS on October 13, 2006 (71 FR 60509).

The Gulf of Mexico red snapper stock is overfished and undergoing overfishing. The status of this stock is influenced not only by fishing mortality rates in the directed commercial and recreational fisheries, but also by red snapper bycatch mortality rates in the shrimp trawl fishery. A recent stock assessment indicates red snapper catch and bycatch levels in the directed red snapper and shrimp fisheries are likely to jeopardize the success of the latest red snapper rebuilding plan implemented in 2005. This rebuilding plan is designed to rebuild the stock by 2032.

The primary purpose of the DEIS prepared by NOAA Fisheries Service is to address assessment recommendations to further reduce directed and bycatch fishing mortality rates on the red snapper stock. This DEIS evaluates the effectiveness of alternative regulatory measures for the following actions: 1) Set total allowable catch (TAC) for the directed red snapper fishery and establish measures to constrain recreational harvest to the recreational

quota associated with a new TAC; 2) set a for-hire captain and crew bag limit; 3) modify the commercial minimum size limit to reduce bycatch in the directed red snapper fishery; 4) modify fishing gear to reduce bycatch and/or bycatch mortality; 5) establish a target reduction goal for juvenile red snapper mortality in the shrimp fishery equivalent to capping effort in the shrimp fishery at the 2005 level; 6) manage shrimp fishing effort through seasonal area closures; and 7) establish a procedural mechanism the Council can use to quickly respond to information indicating shrimp effort is above the cap.

The regulatory measures evaluated in this DEIS may be implemented through an interim rule and/or an amendment to the Council's Reef Fish and/or Shrimp Fishery Management Plans. The interim rule is needed to address overfishing of red snapper in 2007. Long-term measures required to end overfishing and rebuild the stock will be implemented through plan amendments.

The proposed interim rule will consider: Reducing the red snapper TAC to 6.5 million pounds; reducing the recreational bag limit from 4-fish per person per day to 2-fish per person per day; prohibiting the captain and crew of for-hire vessels from retaining a recreational bag limit; reducing the commercial minimum size limit from 15 to 13 inches; and establishing a target reduction goal for the shrimp fishery, which is defined as 50 percent of the bycatch mortality that occurred during 2001-2003 (This is equivalent to capping effort in the shrimp fishery at the 2005 level).

These proposed interim measures differ from the preferred alternatives in the DEIS because NOAA Fisheries Service recognizes the economic and social impacts of hurricanes during 2004 and 2005 and is assuming a 10-percent reduction in recreational effort will occur in 2007.

NOAA Fisheries Service intends to publish the proposed interim rule in late November 2006. There will be a 30-day comment period on the proposed interim measures, which will begin on the date they are published in the *Federal Register*.

For Copies of the DEIS

Copies of the DEIS may be downloaded from the Southeast Regional Office's Web page (<http://sero.nmfs.noaa.gov>; click on Gulf of Mexico Red Snapper) or can be obtained from Phil Steele, NOAA Fisheries Service, 263 13th Avenue South, St. Petersburg, Florida, 33701.

To Submit Comments on this Document

Comments or questions on this document submitted during the agency's 45-day review period for the DEIS must be received by 5 p.m., eastern time, on November 27, 2006. Written comments should be submitted by mail to Phil Steele; see above address. Comments may be submitted by fax to (727) 824-5308. Electronic comments may be submitted by e-mail to 0648-AT87.DEIS@noaa.gov; include in the e-mail subject line the following document identifier: 0648-AT87.

Copies of comments should also be submitted to Rodney F. Weiher, Ph.D., NOAA Office of Programming and Integration (PPI/SP), SSMC3,

Room 15603, 1315 East-West Highway, Silver Spring, Maryland 20910; by fax to 301-713-0585; or by e-mail to nepa.comments@noaa.gov.

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In 2007 the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, an agency of the U.S. Commerce Department, celebrates 200 years of science and service to the nation. From the establishment of the Survey of the Coast in 1807 by Thomas Jefferson to the formation of the Weather Bureau and the Bureau of Commercial Fisheries in the 1870s, much of America's scientific heritage is rooted in NOAA.

NOAA is dedicated to enhancing economic security and national safety through the prediction and research of weather and climate-related events and information service delivery for transportation, and by providing environmental stewardship of our nation's coastal and marine resources. Through the emerging Global Earth Observation System of Systems (GEOSS), NOAA is working with its federal partners, more than 60 countries and the European Commission to develop a global monitoring network that is as integrated as the planet it observes, predicts and protects.

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FB06-048